



Branch of Fire Management
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Fire Management News

Partnerships



Firefighters conduct a prescribed burn of invasive salt cedar at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge. (FWS Photo)

Fighting Salt Cedar in the Southwest

Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, Socorro, NM - Salt cedar or "tamarisk," is an invasive species that has taken over vast areas in the Southwest and is a severe fire hazard. Many refuges are undertaking projects to restore these areas to native vegetation that will reduce wildfire potential and improve essential habitat for numerous wildlife species.

Crews recently burned stands of salt cedar as well as root piles with the help of firefighters from nearby refuges, the Bureau of Land Management, and the U.S. Forest Service. The project is ongoing and continues to be monitored by the FWS with help from the Forest Service's Rocky Mountain Research Station and the University of New Mexico.

International Partnership Promotes Fuels Management

Columbia National Wildlife Refuge, Eastern Washington – A crew of wildland firefighters from Catalonia, a Spanish state bordering the Mediterranean, recently assisted with controlled burns here while receiving training from local FWS crews. Catalonia is similar to Southern California in its highly flammable, abundant fuel loads. The Catalanian crew leader had already spent three months at the refuge learning about modern fire management, and returned home to establish a proactive fuels management program, using 60 fire staff to burn about 8,000 acres per year. In turn, the Catalanian firefighters are training and assisting other fire managers in Spain, France, Portugal, Greece, Slovenia, Croatia, and Russia, enabling those countries to launch their own fuels management programs.

FWS and Partners Restore Private Land

Aransas and Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuges, Southern Texas – Firefighters from these refuges provided technical assistance and support in 2003 to complete two prescribed burns on the Sarco Creek Ranch, as part of the Coastal Prairie Conservation Initiative to benefit and preserve wildlife and its habitat in this critical region of the state. The cooperative maximized the efficient use of resources and minimized costs.

"The cooperative effort demonstrated between The Nature Conservancy, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Texas Parks and Wildlife, Grazing Land Conservation Initiative, Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Sam Houston RC&D, and private landowners is truly remarkable and should be a model for the state and the nation," wrote Sarco Creek Ranch owner Milton S. Greeson, in a letter to the Service's Regional Director for the Southwest Region.

Fire Protects and Restores Habitat

Willamette Valley National Wildlife Refuge Complex, Corvallis, OR – Fire managers here have been using fire on hundreds of acres of hazardous vegetation. The project continues to enhance key habitat for several threatened and endangered species, and is a product of strong local collaboration between FWS staff and the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, Oregon Department of Forestry, and the Monroe Rural Fire Department.

Grants Enable Partners to Protect Homes, Habitat

San Diego Valley National Wildlife Refuge, Jamul, CA – One week prior to the 45,000-acre wind-driven Otay Mine Fire in 2003, equipment and a \$25,000 grant from the refuge enabled the San Diego Rural Fire Protection District to complete a 25-acre fuel break for the Jamul community. This fuel break was one of the few areas where Southern California wildfires raged that firefighters could safely conduct backburns, enabling crews to stop the wildfire from entering Proctor Valley. Firefighters confined fire damage on the 10,000-acre refuge to only 300 acres, saving hundreds of homes and protecting 9,000 acres of key habitat for almost two dozen threatened and endangered species. The refuge also supports a chipping program to encourage local residents to maintain defensible space around their homes.



Understory brush burns at Okefenokee NWR during a prescribed burn. Later wildfires were kept in check because of this type of fire use. (FWS photo)

Prescribed Fire Minimizes Damage and Costs

Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, Southern Georgia – An extensive system of fuel breaks and prescribed fire treatments were put into place in 2002 before the Blackjack Bay fires burned more than 124,000 acres, allowing fire crews to successfully contain the fires on the refuge. The treatment projects were developed in a unique collaboration between local, state and industry forestry partners and minimized resource damage and suppression costs during the fires. In 2003, the refuge worked with local landowners to complete plans to begin managing lightning-caused wildfires for resource benefit, a practice commonly called “fire use.”

FWS Helps TNC Protect Unique Ecosystem

Waterboro Barrens Preserve, Waterboro, ME – Thanks to a \$107,000 FWS assistance agreement, the Maine Chapter of The Nature Conservancy is using both mechanical means and prescribed fire to restore this preserve's pitch pine forests and reduce the risk of wildfires to Waterboro. Reducing the flammable vegetation that accumulated during six decades of fire suppression allowed fire managers to begin reintroducing fire into this rare ecosystem, which depends on fire to recycle critical nutrients. Rotational burning will restore ecological health to the area, provide communities with protection against wildfire, and maintain a mosaic of habitat for a variety of rare wildlife and plant species. Wood chipping will raise funds for the preserve. Other partners in the project include the Maine State Forest Service and local fire departments from the towns of Waterboro, Shapleigh, Newfield, Limerick and Alfred.

Refuges Assist Ugandan Firefighters

Mississippi Sandhill Crane and Piedmont National Wildlife Refuges – As part of the Department of Interior's International Assistance Program, Tony Wilder of Mississippi Sandhill Crane NWR and Carl Schmidt of Piedmont NWR traveled to Uganda to provide expertise in fire suppression tactics for two Uganda National Parks. During their three-week trek, Tony and Carl taught two courses in fire suppression techniques. They also developed fire management plans for the Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, one of the last remaining homes of mountain gorillas, and Queen Elizabeth National Park, home to African Savannahs, lions, elephants and hippos. Tony and Carl received national recognition for their efforts from the African Wildlife Foundation and the Uganda Wildlife Authority.

FWS Educates Partners about WUI

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Northeast Region – This regional fire program provided \$149,000 in grants in 2003 to rural fire departments in Massachusetts, Maine, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Virginia, West Virginia, and North Carolina, to help protect homes adjacent to wildlands. Fire managers also distributed copies of a new video series “Firefighter Safety in the Wildland Urban Interface” to 90 rural fire departments in the region.

Unified Plan Results in Quick Response; Saves Homes

Wertheim National Wildlife Refuge, Brookhaven, NY – In 2003 a human-caused fire occurred in the marsh at this refuge within the boundaries of the New York Central Pine Barrens, adjacent to a 60-home subdivision. Annual prescribed fire and mechanical thinning helped keep the fire at 20 acres, saving the homes from damage. Because of a recent agreement between the FWS, the New York State Forest Rangers, and the Brookhaven Volunteer Fire Department, firefighters were able to coordinate a quick response and establish a unified command. The agreement also allowed Brookhaven to assist with a 35-acre prescribed burn on the refuge, which is bordered on three sides by single-family homes, Long Island Railroad, a shopping plaza, and a private school. The agreement has influenced contact between fire managers on Long Island, where human-caused fires are frequent.

Weed Removal Involves Diverse Groups

Salt Lake County, Utah – Employees of the FWS fire staff here reduced hazardous fuel buildup on 56 acres adjacent to the Utah Ecological Services office. The area was on the edge of a federally designated superfund site from past steel production and over time had become choked with non-native salt cedar and Russian olive trees. The fuel build-up became a concern due to its proximity to the Salt Lake City metro area. The project involved multi-agency cooperation, including FWS, the Utah Reclamation, Mitigation and Conservation Commission, the Great Salt Lake Audubon Society, TreeUtah, West Jordan City, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.